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ROBIN HOOD'S CALL TO ARMS.



How Allan-a-Dale Became One of the Heroes of Sherwood Forest.

CHAPTER 1.

The Young Blacksmith. — A Brave Rescue.—Foresters to the Fore.

ON one side of Upton-cum-Wheatley the heather grew knee-deep to the cottage doors; on the other side large tracts of meadow and cultivated land ran through the forest; beyond lay vast moors, where the foot of man scarcely ever trod. Here, sheltered by the hills, the little Saxon community had lived and died in peace since the days of Edward the Confessor.

The world went very well with the people at Upton-cum-Wheatley. They worked hard and took their pleasures in a robust, healthy style. There were the archery contests, putting the stone, bouts of swordsmanship and quarter-staff, and now and then a fair, when young and old, dressed in their best, sallied forth and held high revel from the rising to the setting of the sun.

Yes, the world went very well, then, with more light than shadow. Handsome children grew up around their parents, and when men and women grew too old and feeble to work their sons and daughters toiled not grudgingly, but lovingly, to keep them in comfort.

For, as Allan-a-Dale, the young blacksmith, often said, "There is a heaven, and the gates will be closed against us if we have failed to honour our fathers and mothers."

A ray of golden light,

the "good-night" of the declining sun, stole round the walls of the forge and finally settled on Allan-a-Dale. He stood with his big brown arms folded, looking at a piece of iron cooling on the anvil.

His master, Athelstang, was at work at a bench filing a piece of metal so gently that the "bite" was lost amid the musical murmur of the fire.

A sturdy boy stood waiting for the signal to put breath into the big bellows and blow the fire into a roar.

Athelstang raised his hand, and then the fire, springing into vigorous life, sent out showers of sparks, not only into the gaping mouth of the chimney, but all round the forge.

"Stop!" said Athelstang, in a half-puzzled, half-angry tone of voice. "I thought Allan-a-Dale was ready. Why, lad, what ails you? All this day you have been distraught. Come, let us bustle, or we'll not be done this side of matins."

Allan - a - Dale pushed back his crisp hair, and, picking up the piece of iron with a pair of pincers, thrust it amid the white-hot embers.

"I was deep in thought," he said. "I had forgotten where I was."

Out came the iron hissing hot, the eager anvil received it, and then, with a "one, two, three, and ready we be," great hammers beat it into shape.

"That will do," Athelstang said. "There shall be no more work to

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night." Then, placing his hand on Allan-a-Dale's shoulder, "When a lad is in love he is half-crazed."

"Were you half-crazed when you were in love?" Allan-a-Dale asked. "By the rood!" he added, "to-morrow I shall be one-and-twenty years of age, and ought to know my own mind."

"I married the woman of my choice because I loved her," Athelstang replied. "I had seen her grow, a comfort to her father and mother, and a help to her younger brothers and sisters. And so I asked her to share my joys and sorrows. But harken, Allan-a-Dale, and take not offence at my words, for none is meant. My wife was in my own station of life, and there were no such difficulties as birth and blood in the way."

Allan-a-Dale started as if the blacksmith's kindly hand had stung him.

"You are like all the rest," the lad cried passionately. "You fling my poverty into my teeth. Winifreda loves me, and I love her! Think you that I dream of touching the gold her father has hoarded? Athelstang, you wrong me."

"You wrong yourself, and me, too, in saying so," Athelstang replied. "Listen. You have wisdom in your head when you like to use it. Edwy Langridge is proud; he has Norman blood in his veins, and—"

"Yes, I know," Allan-a-Dale answered. "He has promised Winifreda to Baron d'Orsay, a shrivelled old man with one foot in the grave—a man who has led a wicked life, a man without one redeeming point in his character."

"Allan-a-Dale," whispered Athelstang, "I have some news for you. Baron d'Orsay has purchased the ground on which we stand—ay, and the very roof over our heads. All Upton-cum-Wheatley is his. He has made the purchase from Edwy Langridge, and henceforth we must regard him as lord and master."

"As landlord—not lord and master."

"I am too old to go into these things," Athelstang said. "When I die there will be enough left to keep the wolf from the door where my wife and children may live."

"D'Orsay lord of Upton-cum-Wheatley!" Allan-a-Dale said bitterly. "Then farewell to the happy days the people have seen."

"Tush! You see only the dark side of the cloud, and forget that it has a silver lining. Poor Allan-a-Dale, you are hard hit, but you will get over it. Come home with me, and I'll warrant you a welcome. Talk with my wife; she loves you as though you were one of her own sons, and she will give you advice, cheer you—ay, perchance lend you her aid, for a woman's wit is oft keener than a man's."

Allan-a-Dale hung his head and sighed; but suddenly throwing his coat over his shoulders he said:

"Forgive me; I am acting like a child. I'll to my own lodging; but to-morrow I'll home with you—"

"In the name of Heaven, what is that?" Athelstang cried.

A young fellow dressed in the livery of a wealthy man staggered, with his hand to his face, past the forge, as shouts and the sound of scuffling came from the village street.

"Save my master!" the boy cried. "Save my master, or they will kill him; I cannot see; the blood from this dreadful wound blinds me."

Allan-a-Dale snatched up a sledge-hammer and ran out, Athelstang, confident in the strength of his brawny arms, following.

About halfway up the straggling street a tragedy was in progress.

A man was on the ground, holding a battered shield above his head; a broken sword lay at his side, which fact seemed to encourage three bearded ruffians with metal badges on their breasts to shower blows upon him with their long, double-edged swords.

"Hold!" Allan-a-Dale shouted. "This is a peaceful place, and we'll have no murder here. Back, I say—back!"

So saying, the young blacksmith rushed in and struck the man nearest him such a blow with the hammer that he fell dead at once.

Seeing what had happened, the two other assailants recoiled a few paces.

"Your back shall smart for this," said one, glaring at Allan-a-Dale. "We

do but our duty. The Baron d'Orsay sent us to bring this man, Edgar Chesney, falsely calling himself a knight, dead or alive to him."

"I am no false knight, but a true one," moaned the prostrate man. "My castle and estate lie on the borders of the Forest of Langley, but D'Orsay is my enemy, and he has sworn to take my life."

"Neither he nor his varlets shall take it now!" Allan-a-Dale said stoutly. "The good hammer I hold has altered the shape of things harder, yet more honest, I trow, than Norman skulls. Rise, Sir Edgar Chesney, and fear nothing. Athelstang, you may leave us. Go you, and see to the knight's poor esquire. These dogs have wounded him sorely, I fear."

"Dogs! You, a Saxon slave, to call us dogs!" yelled one of the Norman henchmen. "By the bones of the Conqueror! you shall be flayed alive!"

"Look to your own skin, and trouble not yourself so much about mine," Allan-a-Dale retorted. "Here is my gage"—flinging down his cap. "Pick it up, and 'fore Heaven I'll treat you as I do a pair of horseshoes on the anvil."

"Here's at you!" exclaimed the Normans, in a breath.

Allan-a-Dale dropped on one knee as the long swords swished viciously over his head. Then the sledge-hammer swung round, leaving but one Norman on his feet.

"Now," said Allan-a-Dale to his remaining foe, "we stand on more equal ground."

Wise in his generation, the henchman took to his heels.

"I will return, never fear," he cried, "and bring others with me. The baron has fifty retainers with him."

"You have lost your life in saving mine," Sir Edgar Chesney said to Allan-a-Dale. "Better had you let them beat the life out of me than cause such misery as will happen."

"Tush! All is not lost. The baron's men will not have it all their own way," the young man replied. "My master will see to your esquire. Come with me, and I will guide you to the crypt."

"The crypt! Where is that?"

"Where should it be but under the church," Allan-a-Dale replied. "Quick! There is no time to be lost. When you are safe I'll rouse up my companions, and I swear that if blood must flow to-night the best part of it shall come from Norman veins!"

Supporting the bruised and weakened knight with his strong arm, Allan-a-Dale half-dragged and half-carried him to the little church standing back from the village street.

"Below is the crypt," he said, pointing at the wall. "I know the working of the flagstone that will admit you to it. The stairs are safe, so go straight down, and wait until I release you. If I should fall, others will come."

Sinking on his hands and knees, Allan-a-Dale seized the flagstone and, giving it a twist sideways, turned it completely over.

Sir Edgar Chesney had only just disappeared, and the great flagstone was scarcely in its original place, when the clatter of horses' hoofs came to Allan-a-Dale's ears.

"My faith!" he thought, "D'Orsay's full force was nearer than I thought. I must look to myself, or there will be little left of me."

Springing lightly up, he caught at a small window-sill, and pushing open a wooden shutter, was through in a moment.

"Now for the belfry," he said. "From there I can see all; but, Heaven help me! I must get to the village somehow and raise the alarm, or women and children will perish to-night for what I have done. Merciful powers! The church-door is open. Who can have done this?"

A figure, grim, gaunt, and shapeless, sprang up before him.

Allan-a-Dale's heart grew sick and his hair bristled. He had often heard that the church was haunted by the spirit of a savage chieftain who had mocked at Christianity, and here was the spectre.

As he stood trembling in spite of himself, but gripping the sledge-hammer—ay, and ready to strike, too—other forms arose from the pews and from behind the pillars supporting the roof, until the church seemed full of apparitions.

"In the name of Heaven!" Allan-a-Dale cried, "tell me who and what you are!"

"Put down that hammer, boy," said a ghost, shorter and broader than the rest. "I am a man of peace—otherwise known as Friar Tuck."

"Can it be true?" Allan-a-Dale gasped. "If Friar Tuck is here, then Robin Hood must be here, too."

"He is! Allan-a-Dale, you are known to us."

In the twinkling of an eye the cloaks which Robin Hood and some score of his men had pulled over their heads dropped upon their shoulders, and then to the floor.

One man quickly piled them in a heap, and then crept close to Friar Tuck.

Allan-a-Dale saw all this as in a dream. At length he spoke.

"Where, then, is the bold Robin Hood I have heard so much talk of?" he said.

"You behold him," replied a stalwart man, striding forward. "Allan-a-Dale, you are a worthy lad. Give me your hand."

It was too dark for Allan-a-Dale to see the face of the King of Sherwood Forest, but his voice had the ring and his hand the pressure of an honest man.

"You know me!" Allan-a-Dale exclaimed in amaze.

"Yes," Robin Hood replied; "and your story, too. But I and my merry men have not travelled so many miles to help you in your sweetheartsing, although that we yet may do. At present we have sterner business in hand. But what brought you here in the dark? To seek sanctuary?"

Quickly enough Allan-a-Dale told the outlaw what had happened.

"They have arrived some hours before I expected," Robin Hood said. "Listen, lad! D'Orsay had arranged that this village should be attacked and cleared of all Saxons this very night. The king is away from England, and once more Prince John sits in his place; and the beast, for the sake of gold, has signed a warrant—"

"I have heard that the baron has purchased the village."

"Do not interrupt," Robin Hood said sternly. "D'Orsay has purchased lives as well as land and houses. Release Sir Edgar Chesney, for he must wield a sword with such men as can strike a blow for liberty. Trust me, our bows and arrows will do the rest."

"Then," said Allan-a-Dale, "it is time that we were gone, for the Normans are swarming all over the village. Happily, it is past curfew, or every door would be open."

The men swarmed out of the church, and in a few moments Sir Edgar Chesney joined them.

"Far be it for me, being a man of peace, and with nothing better than a staff to protect a bald head with, to give advice," said Friar Tuck; "but it seemeth to me that the church wall affords an excellent place to shoot from. Also, methinks I hear some of the Norman horsemen coming this way. Where is the little child I must always look after?"

The little child was no other than the burly giant known as Little John.

"What want you with me?"

"Only to see that you do not get into mischief."

"Look to yourself, Sir Shaven-Crown," growled Little John.

"Keep quiet, there," said Robin Hood. "Here they come!"

Fully a score Norman troopers came galloping up and halted within a few paces of the wall, under which the Saxons were now crouching.

"We must make sure of the young blacksmith first," said a voice. "He will make a noise and bring a rabble out, and that will be sufficient excuse for us to fall foul of them."

"True," remarked another Norman. "It is just as well to have some excuse. Our footmen will be ready with the faggots and torches."

"Yes; they will come when the moon has gone behind the hills."

"Then," said the first speaker, laughing brutally, "there will be a fine blaze to-night. I wonder where the young knight of the sledge-hammer has hidden himself. Like as not he is in the church."

"Suppose some of us go and see."

Four of the troopers dismounted, and one, jumping at the wall, drew his head above the brickwork.

The next moment that head received such a tremendous thwack that its owner thought it had flown from his shoulders.

As he fell, rolling, gasping, and groaning into the road, his comrades charged up to the wall, shouting and flourishing their swords. But soon their shouts turned to yells of dismay.

Up rose Robin Hood and his men, and although somewhat hampered, being at short range, the arrows from their bows did dreadful execution.

Men rolled from the saddle and fell into the road, their armour making such a clatter that the horses took fright and stampeded.

In vain did those who remained unhurt strive to check the animals. Away they went helter-skelter, plunging, rearing, kicking, despising curb and bit.

Little John leapt over the church-yard wall, and capturing one of the horses, waved his death-dealing axe on high.

"Victory!" he roared. "No Normans! England for the Saxons! Ho, for bold Robin Hood and his archers true!"

"Let us not laugh before we are out of the wood," said Robin. "These Normans will come again, and bring more with them. Heard you not what they said about footmen, faggots, and torches? That means the houses are to be burnt. We must rouse the people to a sense of their danger. Allan-a-Dale, pull the bell that rings when a fire breaks out."

Allan-a-Dale rushed into the church, and soon the great bell boomed out its sonorous notes.

Out poured the people from their houses; the men with staves, knives, swords; some with scythe-blades mounted on poles, telling that they had prepared for an emergency.

Pale women stood and wondered, and little children shuddered as they hid their faces in their mothers' gowns.

Not only were the people in the village itself aroused. They came from

the neighbouring farms; shepherds left their sheep; and herdsmen, whose business it was to keep the cattle from straying, came running down.

"You must be prepared," Robin Hood said. "The Normans are coming in great strength to burn your homesteads and drive you forth homeless! I am here, and will protect you as far as I am able, but you must be brave and confident in yourselves. Think of your aged parents! Think of your wives and little children! Strike for liberty! Sweet liberty or death!"

The foresters' battle-cry went upwards like a peal of thunder, and rolled from hill to dale and back again.

CHAPTER 2.

Allan-a-Dale's Sweetheart.

EDWY LANGRIDGE and his lovely daughter were the guests of Walter, Baron d'Orsay.

The baron's castle was roomy, but not of great strength. The moat had dried up, the outer walls had crumbled away, and no attempt had been made to throw up earthworks and plant them with sharpened stakes, as often happened when noblemen living near each other were at variance.

Baron d'Orsay was old. More than seventy years had passed over his head, and his white hair proclaimed that he was in the winter of his life. He had taken no part, either active or passive, in the Crusade. He was, in a measure, at peace with the other barons, for he was rich and lent them money when they needed it, as they often did.

D'Orsay's own retainers were few, but he knew where to borrow them, for he held some of the nobility in the hollow of his hand, owing to their debts to him.

Although almost in his dotage, Baron d'Orsay had fallen in love with Winifreda Langridge. But needless to say the girl did not love him. Her heart had been given to Allan-a-Dale.

In the great shadowy banqueting-hall of the castle she, her father, and the baron sat. There had been a few guests, but they had departed, as also had the minstrels from the gallery;

but yet one other man remained—a grave, silent individual, who sat nearly hidden by a pile of parchment deeds, at the side of which was one spread wide open, with three seals attached, but unsigned.

"And now, friend Langridge," the baron said, in a cracked voice, "as you and your fair daughter are to be my guests for some days, I see no reason why we should not discuss matters so near and dear to us."

Edwy Langridge smiled and looked at his daughter; but with a look of disgust on her face Winifreda turned her head aside.

"Upton-cum-Wheatley is mine," Baron d'Orsay continued; "and I have sent certain of my men to—ahem!—acquaint the people of the fact. Indeed, as I require the land for some other purpose, they will have to go."

Winifreda looked round sharply.

"Father," she said, "although you are of Norman blood, your wife, my dear mother, was a Saxon, and her spirit will not rest in peace if harm comes to these honest folk."

"Why remind me of your mother?" replied Langridge impatiently. "Because she was a Saxon, does it hold good that I cannot dispose of my own property? The baron has paid me more than any other man in England would, so let us be grateful to him for this and his other generous offer."

Winifreda rose to her feet.

"No offer that he makes concerns me personally," she said. "With your permission, I will retire to the room appointed to me."

The scrivener looked uneasily from the parchment before him to Baron d'Orsay.

"Pardon me," he said, "but I understood that this deed was to be signed to-night?"

"Yes, to-night—this very night," the old baron giggled. "That is the compact between us, Langridge, eh?"

"It is," Edwy Langridge responded fiercely; "and by the bones of my sire, I will see it carried out! Hear me, Winifreda! You are my daughter, and must obey me. The baron has made you an offer of marriage, and—"

"I refuse it!" Winifreda interrupted. "Oh, Heaven! Let me go to my room! I cannot breathe the atmosphere of this place!"

"Have a care that when you go to your room, you do not find yourself under lock and key," Langridge hissed. "Stay where you are, and pay heed to what I say, or you may repent of angering me. I know your secret. You have encouraged a base-born churl named Allan-a-Dale, a common blacksmith, who goes about looking lovesick and sighing your name."

"Allan-a-Dale's blood is as noble as your own," Winifreda replied boldly. "The Normans robbed his ancestors, as you know full well. He is a blacksmith, but he earns an honest living, and has an honest heart, and I love him!"

"Furies!" Edwy Langridge almost shrieked. "She confesses it with her own lips!"

"And why should I lie when my heart bids me speak truthfully? You would have me marry Baron d'Orsay, a man many years older than yourself. Have you considered me? No! Have you given a single thought or care that such a match is repulsive to me? Have you given one thought that if I married this old man I should hate instead of loving him? No! You have no thought but for yourself. Gold is your god, and you would sell me body and soul for it. But it shall not be! I swear, by the emblem of my faith, it shall not be!"

"Scrivener!" Langridge thundered, "pass the marriage settlement this way, and give her the pen. She shall sign. The law is on my side."

"There is another law more sacred than all the laws dreamed of by scheming men," Winifreda cried, drawing herself up proudly. "It was made in heaven, where all is good and holy, and by all that is good and holy I would rather immure myself in a nunnery than debase myself in a union with this old man."

Up to this moment Baron d'Orsay had not uttered a word. He had sat with his neck hunched into his shoulders, and looking as stupid as an owl.

"This is very distressing, and not what I expected, friend Langridge," he croaked. "No wedding; no money! Those are my terms, and unless your daughter consents I will throw Upton-cum-Wheatley on your hands."

"You hear that?" Langridge hissed, seizing Winifreda by the wrist.

"Yes, I hear," she replied, wrenching herself away. "Unnatural man! unworthy to be a father, I hear you, alas! but nothing shall turn me from my purpose."

"By the Evil One! you shall never walk free again until you come round to your senses!" Langridge cried in a fury. "Out of my sight! To your room, girl, and understand that you are a prisoner. I will bring you with my own hands black bread and water."

"Better black bread and water, or even starvation, to such misery as you propose," Winifreda said, turning away.

"Maiden—beauteous maiden!" exclaimed D'Orsay, tottering to his feet, "I beg you not to leave us in so rebellious a state of mind. Your father is a passionate man, but he means well. Will you listen to me? Behold me at your feet, your slave."

"Rise, dotard, and insult me not with your love-making," Winifred said. "Go to some of your Norman ladies, and perchance they will be willing to listen to you, but not I."

"Perdition!" gasped Langridge, with his hand on his sword. "She will drive me to madness. If she be not gone, I shall strike her dead at my feet."

With a haughty gesture Winifreda flung aside the tapestried arras and disappeared.

For nearly a minute Langridge stood as if he had been stricken dumb and powerless, but at length he followed. Returning presently, he flung a key on the table.

"There, D'Orsay!" he said, "she is a prisoner in your own castle. To-morrow at dawn a priest shall be in attendance, and she shall be your wife, trust me. Scrivener, have I not the law on my side?"

"Even so," the scrivener said. "Your daughter being under age, you can decide who shall be her husband."

At that moment the tapestry flew aside, and the baron's steward appeared.

"Baron," he said, smoothing down his ruffled hair, "there have been strange doings at Upton-cum-Wheatley. Your retainers have returned, bringing four wounded, and leaving no fewer than six dead behind."

D'Orsay and Edwy Langridge stared in blank dismay at each other.

"The Saxons are in revolt!" the steward continued. "Every man is in arms. Athelstang and Allan-a-Dale have been chosen as leaders, while the strange archers——"

"Strange archers!" Baron D'Orsay gasped, clutching at the back of his chair to keep himself from falling.

"Yes, men wearing cloaks and doublets of Lincoln green. They go about shouting 'No Normans! Sweet Liberty or Death!' and encouraging the Saxon churls to resistance."

"Robin Hood and his foresters, by all that is horrible!" Edwy Langridge groaned. "How, in the name of all that is wonderful, did they discover what was transpiring, D'Orsay?"

The baron started, as if from a dream.

"You spoke. Say on."

"We must to London and implore the help of Prince John."

"Yes, yes," D'Orsay replied, in an uncertain tone of voice, as if he did not comprehend what had happened. "You speak of some of my men being slain. Well, others shall take vengeance. As to this rebel, Robin Hood, why, of course, he shall be hanged, and with the string of his own bow, if it be strong enough."

"Old fool!" Langridge muttered. "He is in his second childhood, and little dreams of the power possessed by the so-called King of Sherwood Forest. Listen, D'Orsay," he cried aloud. "It will be well to make terms with these Saxons. Say that they are mistaken as to your intentions, and send them a sum of money to calm them. Here is the scrivener; he will see to it."

"I will write out all you say, but I will not go to Upton-cum-Wheatley while Robin Hood is near," replied the scrivener.

"We must find another and braver man, then," Langridge snarled. "Come, D'Orsay, keep your courage. To-morrow you shall be wed, and then to Court and see Prince John. In the meantime, shower some of your gold among this rabble."

"To-morrow will do," the baron replied cautiously. "There is no day like a wedding-day to be liberal to the poor. The Saxons will not come here—at least, to-night. It is much too far. I'll now to bed, and leave the safety of the castle in your hands, friend Langridge."

No sooner had the baron left than Edwy Langridge flung himself into a chair, and filling a goblet to the brim with wine, disposed of it at a draught.

"I'll not be thwarted by twenty Robin Hoods, and, moreover, I will hold D'Orsay to his bond!" he cried, shaking his fist at the scrivener. "How stands the deeds?"

"They are full of provisos, and all in the favour of the baron," the scrivener said, smiling behind his hand.

Edwy Langridge gave vent to an exclamation of rage.

"Death and destruction!" he yelled, leaping up and pacing the hall with hasty strides. "I will have the deeds altered! I will not be cheated! I—"

"Stay, good sir," the scrivener interrupted. "The baron is not a man of education—indeed, he cannot read*—so it will be no hard matter to prepare another deed, providing—"

"You are a cunning rascal," Langridge interrupted, smiling; "but I see your meaning. Prepare such a deed as the baron cannot back out of, and I will reward you with a hundred nobles."

"It shall be done," the scrivener replied. "I will set about it at once."

While the scrivener wrote, and Langridge stood over him, watching with greedy eyes, Winifreda was making her escape from the castle.

It had never entered her father's mind that she would think of such a thing, for the country round was drear

and desolate at night, and filled with terrors for the weak and timid. Ghouls and goblins were said to haunt the woods between midnight and cockcrow, and certain it was that strange and awful sounds were often heard, produced by owls, bats, wild-cats, and other birds and animals of prey.

But Winifreda had no fears. Her duty was plain before her. She could not remain under the same roof with Baron d'Orsay, and her father was nothing to her. She tore the stout sheeting of her bed into strips, and knotting them together lowered herself to the ground.

The distance was not great, and, as luck would have it, the sentry was pacing on the other side of the castle.

Winifreda was a brave, active girl, and it required but little effort on her part to scale the wall. Then she ran as if for dear life, and kept on until she reached a wood. Then she halted, and sinking down at the base of a tree lowered her face into her hands and wept and sobbed as if her heart would break.

Where to go or what to do, she did not know.

Allan-a-Dale loved her well, but she could not go to him. Athelstang was her friend, but he could not give her shelter without running a great risk. Indeed, the poor Saxons were to be turned from their homes. The wicked old baron had said so with his own lips.

Winifreda prayed for strength and courage to support her in the hour of her trial, and her prayer was answered.

The sights and sounds she saw and heard in the wood were terrifying, but she knew them to be natural and not ghostly, as the simple folks avowed. The wood was haunted by living things, for the dead sleep at peace and can do no harm.

Suddenly the girl rose, and plunging deeper into the wood kept boldly on, until chance brought her to an old hawthorn tree bending nearly to the earth, forming a perfect bower. Here, too, was shelter against the wind and rain, if it fell.

Winifreda stretched herself on the moss-grown earth and was soon asleep.

* A good many of the nobility of this time could neither read nor write. In proof of this, a number of the barons put their marks to Magna Charta because they could not write their own names.—ED.

When she awoke the larks were rising to greet the sun, and the air was full of sweetness and melody.

The girl crept from the bower, and found herself in a veritable paradise. The trees that had looked so gaunt and spectre-like were now stately and beautiful. Thousands of wild flowers raised their heads to catch the diamond dew-drops, and herds of deer grazed in the distance.

"Which way shall I go?" Winifreda asked herself. "By ill chance I may return to the castle. By this time no doubt my absence has been discovered, and my father will send men in pursuit. But, before Heaven, they shall not take me back alive! Oh, Heaven! What is that? The wretches are here!"

The sound of voices had come to her ears, and Winifreda ran behind a tree. A sheathed dagger hung at her girdle, and drawing it she watched with pale face and bated breath.

Soon some men appeared, and at a glance she saw that they were not Normans, but strangers to her, and she marvelled at the rich green colour of their doublets.

"Robin Hood and his foresters!" she cried. "I am saved!"

The sudden relief overwhelmed her, and she sank fainting on the sward.

And then, as in a sweet dream, she heard the words:

"Fear not, Winifreda, dearest. Your true lover, Allan-a-Dale, is here!"

It was no dream. She opened her eyes and threw her arms round the neck of the handsome young fellow kneeling at her side.

"Zounds! I envy you, Allan-a-Dale!" Little John said. "Next to Robin Hood's sweetheart, there is no fairer maiden in all England."

"Pooh!" said Friar Tuck, pushing him aside. "The lady wants none of your flattery. You, a judge of beauty! Ho, ho! Get back, lumbering monster, or you will frighten her into another faint."

All this fell on deaf ears so far as Winifreda was concerned. She only saw Allan-a-Dale, and clung tightly to him.

"Winifreda," he said, "we owe our meeting to Robin Hood. Press his hand

to your lips and thank him in the fulness of your heart."

"Maiden," said Robin Hood, with infinite tenderness, "it is the duty of every honest man to protect the weak and persecuted. But tell us how it is that you are here. Hearing that you and your father were staying with Baron d'Orsay, we were on our way to take observations of the castle, with a view of besieging it in a few days. Allan-a-Dale, Upton-cum-Wheatley is no longer the place for you. Enlist in my forces, and I will make a good warrior in the cause of liberty of you."

"Willingly would I say yes," Allan-a-Dale replied. "But——"

He hesitated, looking at Winifreda, who lowered her shapely head and clasped her hands, mutely appealing to him not to leave her.

"I understand why you hesitate," Robin Hood said, laughing. "Love is strong, and I do not blame you. Ho, there! Where is Friar Tuck?"

"Here I am, noble chief," said the friar, walking away from Little John, with whom he had been holding an animated discussion.

"These young people love each other, it is easy to see," Robin Hood said, "and I have a mind they shall be married this very day."

"So be it," Friar Tuck replied. "We'll back to the church, and there I'll perform the ceremony."

"But you know they must be asked three times."

"I'll ask them seyen times if you like," the merry monk replied.

"Come, then," cried Robin Hood. "We'll have a merry wedding to-day, and Will Scarlet shall escort Allan-a-Dale and his bride to Sherwood Forest; but I must remain awhile to see what transpires. I cannot leave the people of Upton-cum-Wheatley to their fate."

A tramp of five miles brought them to the village.

The news of what was to happen spread like wildfire, and the people followed the foresters as they trooped sturdily to the church.

Fifteen minutes later the ceremony was performed that made Allan-a-Dale and Winifreda man and wife.

"Now for the register," said Friar Tuck. "Sign—and quickly, too. Now, brave Robin and Little John, put down your names as witnesses, and I'll lose no time in writing the marriage lines."

Then out of the church they went, horses were brought, and away went the bride and bridegroom under an escort commanded by Will Scarlet.

Scarcely were they out of sight when Baron d'Orsay, attended by two troopers, came riding up.

"Good people," said the baron, "I come in peace. Some villain has reported that I intend to drive you from your homes."

Athelstang the blacksmith stepped forward.

"It is enough for us to know that the village has been sold to you," he said. "We know what to expect at the hands of such a man as you, or of any other Norman noble."

"Tyrant!" cried Sir Edgar Chesney, appearing from the crowd. "Ay, worse than tyrant, for you are an assassin! At your instigation I was beaten down by your varlets, and but for Allan-a-Dale I should have been murdered."

The baron's face grew dark at the mention of Allan-a-Dale, but he forced a smile to his lips.

"You are in the wrong," he said. "It has come to my ears that certain of my men, who had been drinking, did commit an outrage, and they shall be punished for it. Sir Edgar, we have been at variance, but let it all go. Why should we not be friends? Come, give me your hand as a sign that all is forgotten and forgiven."

"No man can put any trust in your word," Sir Edgar said, turning away haughtily. "Were you a younger man, I would demand to cross swords with you. Go back, old man, and repent of your sins ere it be too late."

"And, by our Lady! you are a bold man to come here," Robin Hood said, gazing sternly at the baron. "Many a better man has died with a rope round his neck for less than you have done. But since you have come under a truce, my hands are tied. Back to your castle, and take heed that I am not there before you."

CHAPTER 3.

Normans Rallied and Routed.

"You are the bold rebel I have heard so much of," Baron d'Orsay said.

Robin Hood doffed his hat and bowed mockingly.

"Yes, here I am, King of Sherwood Forest, and the sworn enemy of all Normans," he replied. "I have news for you. Sir Edgar Chesney has consented to be officer of mine, and has placed his castle and retainers at my disposal."

"That may be," Baron d'Orsay replied, waving his hand. "We shall see who will suffer for these acts in the end. I come in peace, I say; and more, I come on an act of mercy. People of Upton-cum-Wheatley, you all know Winifreda, daughter of Langridge?"

They answered him with a shout of assent.

"She has done a foolish thing," the baron continued. "She has fled from my castle, her loving father is distracted, and I, her affianced husband—"

A roar of laughter interrupted him.

"What means this unseemly mirth?" the baron demanded. "Winifreda may be—"

"She is," said Friar Tuck.

"Is here?" demanded the baron.

"No," replied the friar, beaming all over his jovial face. "She is not here, and she is beyond your reach for ever. Winifreda has changed her name, and is now the wife of Allan-a-Dale."

"It cannot be true! It is a lie!" the baron gasped.

"Call me a liar, and I will strike you as true a blow as ever came from quarter-staff!" Friar Tuck cried angrily. "It is as I say. Go to the church and see for yourself. I married them, and the register is duly signed."

"This is infamous. There is no marriage!" roared the baron in a fury. "Outcast of the church! Villain—"

Whack! came the friar's quarter-staff on the baron's shoulder, and he reeled out of the saddle and lay grovelling in the dust.

"Hold!" exclaimed Robin Hood, as several of the villagers made a rush

towards the baron. "Let no man strike him! You Saxons know how to meet a foe; but it would be to your everlasting disgrace if you attacked and slew a defenceless man. The baron's blood is much too hot, and requires cooling. To the pond with him for giving Friar Tuck the lie, and then let him go to his castle and nurse his revenge."

"Let the task be mine," Athelstang said, picking the baron up. "See this trembling wretch! This is the man who, when the people begged for bread, told them to eat grass. This is the man who harnessed his bondsmen to carts and drove them under the lash, like yoked oxen. I have heard my father tell the tale many a time."

"False—all false," Baron d'Orsay, stammered. "For the love of Heaven, let me go! I'll have none of you, your houses, or your lands. Let Langridge take all back."

"Your lies choke you," Athelstang said, dragging the baron along. "You know that all I have said is true, ay, and more, for you have been guilty of crimes not fit for ears to hear. Tush! I'll not hurt you. A little water, though it be somewhat sluggish, will do you no harm."

The pond was not far away, and into it went the baron with a loud splash.

Athelstang hauled him out, but Robin Hood had not quite done with him yet.

"Down on your knees and cry mercy of Friar Tuck," the outlaw said.

"I do! I do!" spluttered the wretched old man.

"Then go, as fast as your horse can take you," said Robin Hood, giving him a light cuff on the side of his head.

D'Orsay climbed into the saddle and gathered up the reins with dripping hands.

"As a man of peace, I should advise the baron to get to his bed as quickly as possible," said Friar Tuck. "The day is warm, but old bones, when soaked, are likely to catch aches and cramps. Stand aside, good people, and let him depart."

As the baron wheeled his horse round, the villagers sent a cheer of derision after him, and jeers and gibes followed him until his horse had carried him out of earshot.

"Comrades," said the outlaw chief, "if I mistake not, the baron will put every man he has in force against us, and send for aid. Come, Friar Tuck, and you, my officers, we must hold a council."

Robin Hood was anxious to get back to Sherwood Forest as quickly as possible, but he could not leave the villagers to their fate. They were brave, but not organised to withstand the determined attack of mail-clad men armed to the teeth and mounted on powerful horses.

The inhabitants of the little hamlet did not muster more than two hundred, and Robin Hood decided to shelter the women and children in a wood until he ascertained the strength D'Orsay could put against him.

This plan was carried out with all expedition, and none too soon. The baron met Langridge on his way back, and a violent scene took place between them.

The baron declared he would not complete the contract now that Winifreda had been taken from him, and Langridge swore by everything he could think of that he should.

In one matter, however, they agreed. Robin Hood, the foresters, and the villagers should be put to the sword.

"There shall not be a woman or child left!" D'Orsay said, beating the air with his clenched hands. "Every man who can wield a weapon shall sally forth. I have been insulted, treated worse than a mountebank or common churl, and I'll have revenge! Langridge, take a fresh horse, and summon every man with Norman blood in his veins for miles around. Death to the Saxon dogs!"

In a few hours over a hundred men were in harness and ready to start; but in the meantime Robin Hood and his foresters had not been idle.

There was but one road open to the Normans, who, as the outlaw knew, would attack on horseback, and this at the entrance of the village was guarded by picked archers, while the Saxon peasantry, with strong hands and willing hearts, felled trees to form a barricade.

The whir of grindstones grated harshly through the air as the rougher

style of arms were sharpened; and Robin Hood and his men did not forget to look well to their bows and see that their arrows were true.

One of Robin's scouts brought the news that the Normans were on the move. Through field and forest they were coming on—an imposing force, the sun glistening on their steel caps and spears.

With sullen looks and hate in their eyes, the Normans advanced, burning for revenge, and stirred to courage by the hope of gaining the huge sums of money promised them by D'Orsay and Langridge.

At the entrance to the forest Robin Hood and a number of men crouched under the barricade of timber, while the remainder were placed in such positions as to rush out at the sound of the outlaw's whistle.

The Normans, on coming in view of the barricade, halted. In some places it was not so high but that a good horse could leap it, but D'Orsay guessed what lurked behind those trees.

"Perdition!" he hissed. "They must have worked like giants to have done so much. There is nothing to be done but to ride round the village and attack it on the forest side."

"Send a few men forward," Langridge hissed. "Perchance this is but a ruse to make us fear an ambuscade. Everything is still. Perchance Robin Hood has withdrawn his men, and the people, too. If so, we have an easy task before us. We will pursue the churls and cut them down."

D'Orsay shook his head.

"No," he said, "if what is said of Robin Hood is true, he will show fight."

"Then send a few men forward, I repeat," Langridge said. "There never was a battle fought yet without some sacrifice."

"Since that is your advice, why not follow it yourself?" D'Orsay said.

"I am no coward," Langridge retorted scornfully. "Have I not more cause to hate these rebels than you? Yes, because they have taken my daughter from me and married her to a churl. Perdition! It drives me mad to think of it. Who will come with me?"

he demanded, looking round. "A thousand nobles for the head of Robin Hood, the rebel!"

The Normans answered with a loud shout. Once over the barricade, and they would hold the Saxons at their mercy. The hoofs of the great horses would trample them down, and then lance and sword should do the rest.

"Charge!—charge!" Langridge thundered. "Keep at my side, D'Orsay, or I will cut you down with my own sword. On! on!"

A loud mocking laugh was the response. It came from the lips of Little John, and then, as the Norman horses broke into a mad gallop, the air was darkened by hissing shafts, and the barricade became alive with men.

Unable to restrain themselves, the archers leaped over it and flung themselves boldly into the fray. They wore no armour. They scorned to protect their heads and manly breasts with coverings of steel.

And now bows were slung, and out flashed swords forged in the caves of Sherwood Forest during the long winter months.

Men fell where they stood, others struggled on the ground, and horses rolled over each other in wild and terrible confusion.

Encouraging his foresters with words and doughty deeds, Robin Hood seemed to bear a charmed life, and everywhere he went, there, too, was Little John, wielding his axe and dealing destruction at every blow.

D'Orsay, white with rage and terror, put spurs to his horse and fled, and Langridge, half-stunned, his face laid open and streaming with blood, fell forward on the neck of his steed and slipped from the saddle, to be crushed to death by the iron-shod hoofs that passed over him.

"We get no quarter from the Normans, so no quarter for them!" roared the Saxons. "Fight on! Fight on until there is not a foeman left!"

Robin Hood sprang upon the steed Langridge had ridden, and, speeding after Baron d'Orsay, soon overtook him.

"Turn, old tyrant, turn and sur-

render!" he cried. "It is beneath me to kill you, but you shall go with me a prisoner. Never again shall these poor people tremble at a threat from your vile lips. What! will you not turn! Then, by Heaven! I will strike, and strike home."

Just then a wild shout of triumph burst from the lips of the foresters as the last of the Normans put spurs to their horses and fled.

"Victory! Victory!" cried the conquerors.

Thrown off his guard for a moment, Robin Hood turned his head, and Baron d'Orsay struck savagely at him.

The sword cut the outlaw's hat clean away and missed his scalp by the breadth of a hair.

"I have been mistaken in you," the outlaw said, starting back, "You are an old man, but 'fore heaven! you are strong enough to wield a sword in a right soldierly fashion. Pest! There! I send you from the world."

"Quarter! Do not kill me!" the baron exclaimed, dropping his sword and throwing up his hands. "I surrender."

"Take the wretch prisoner," said Robin Hood, turning in disgust to Little John, who came running up. "We will not be troubled with him long, for his presence would bring nothing but curses. We'll loose him on some desolate moor, and he shall know what it is to starve and to be homeless. Little John, my men cry victory; but I fear that it has been dearly bought."

The giant made no reply; he knew that his chief's fear was well founded.

Robin Hood had lost four good men, and twice that number were wounded, while the Saxon peasantry had suffered considerably, but around those who had passed away in the cause of right and justice lay nearly four-score Normans.

"The loss is great," Robin Hood said, "but the victory more than compensates it. We'll rest to-night, and then to D'Orsay's castle and loot it. See that the peasantry have their full share, for they had better leave the village and follow me to Sherwood. In good truth, I cannot have too many men on my side, for I see full well that

this conflict will lead to another and a greater one. But I'll not shrink from it, be sure of that."

"When you shrink from a foeman, then will I bow my bare neck to him and bid him strike," Little John returned. "King—or great chief, as I love to call you best—if you but command a call to arms, how many men, think you, will answer it?"

"Can I count upon four hundred?"

"Ay, and nearly double that number if I mistake not."

"Then," said Robin Hood, with brightening eyes, "Prince John may send an army of picked warriors against me, and I will not fear to meet them."

CHAPTER 4.

The Baron and the Prince.

EARLY one morning there crawled into the streets of London a wretched, forlorn old man. Thoughtless boys made sport of him, and the citizens turned from him, lest they should come in contact with the filthy rags that covered his body.

And yet this man was Baron d'Orsay. He had made long journeys on foot, and occasionally getting a lift on a vehicle on the road, but always begging his bread, and always miserable.

Not a soul knew him. All laughed at him when he declared himself to be a baron, and held him mad, for did ever noble pose in such a guise?

Money he had none; his rich attire had been torn from him, and garments more fit for a scarecrow than a man given him in exchange.

He had called at several castles and mansions, but no porter or henchman would listen to him, and not a gate was opened to his piteous appeals.

In vain did he tell of his woes—of the havoc and ruin and death spread by Robin Hood and his men.

"Oh," said one, "Prince John knows what has happened, and the real Baron d'Orsay has had audience with him, so away, old mountebank, or you will find the road to the whipping-post and stocks."

At length, tired of declaring his rank, lest he should be cast into prison,

he reached London and made his way to the Tower, where Prince John, in the absence of Richard I., was holding his court.

When Baron d'Orsay presented himself at the gates of the royal fortress, he was met by a grim soldier clad in complete armour who, thrusting a halberd within an inch of his breast, told him to begone for a scurvy old knave and vagabond.

"I am Walter, Baron d'Orsay," the old man said; "and I beg that you will send to Prince John and tell him that I am here. I am neither scurvy knave nor vagabond, as you will soon discover to your cost, for the prince will not fail to recognise me."

The soldier laughed in his face.

"Ho! there, Roderick," he shouted to a man within the gates. "Here is an unwashed bundle of rags come to see the prince. This way, and tell me what you make of him."

The individual spoken to was a great, burly Norman, carrying an immense bundle of keys in his belt. He came striding up, his sword clanking on the flagstones.

"Roderick," the baron cried joyfully, "you remember me? You were one of Prince John's bodyguards when he was my guest."

Roderick scanned the old man's face, and starting visibly said:

"By the bones of the martyr Edmund, you speak true! You are Baron d'Orsay. But, in the name of Heaven, how came you in this plight?"

"You will hear anon," the baron replied. "Bid this fellow with an insolent tongue to admit me. The prince shall hear of him, never fear."

"How was I to know?" the soldier grumbled. "I crave your pardon for making the mistake, baron."

"Too late," d'Orsay snarled. "Such fellows as you must be taught manners. Perchance I shall enjoy seeing you hang before the sun goes down."

So saying, he followed Roderick, who, having conducted him to an apartment and sent a servant for refreshments, went straight to the prince.

John happened to be in a merry mood. He had just sentenced to death

a young knight who had refused to bear arms for him, and no sooner did he hear of Baron d'Orsay coming to the Tower, all unshaven, hungry, athirst, and in rags, than he leaned back in his chair and roared with laughter.

"Would that I had seen him first!" he cried. "Would that I had met him in the street! What sport I would have had! I have expected him with a train of men at his heels. But the proud baron in rags! Ha, ha, ha! Bring him in, Roderick!"

But suddenly Prince John's face, flushed with wine and convulsed with laughter, changed its expression.

"Stay, Roderick," he said. "See that the baron has a change of raiment befitting his rank, and send the barber to him. When the baron is ready, I will see him alone."

In less than half an hour Roderick returned, saying that Baron d'Orsay was most anxious to be admitted, and Prince John dismissed his attendants.

The wily prince received the baron graciously, and listened to the story of his wrongs.

"News travels slowly, even to my ears," said Prince John. "I heard that Robin Hood had made a raid in the north, but was not aware that it was of any importance. Baron, you seek revenge? Men I can offer you; but my royal brother's extravagance has nearly emptied the coffers, so such an expedition as you propose—"

"Let not gold stand in the way," the baron interposed. "I am an old man, and when I die my estates and money will pass into the hands of those for whom I have no affection. Grant me the aid I ask, and I will pay the cost."

"Give me your hand, baron," the prince cried, his eyes flashing greedily. "'Fore Heaven, you shall have a force to be proud of! And I will go with you to Nottingham, and then on to Sherwood. This fox of the forest, Robin Hood, must be hunted down and killed!"

Within two days the men chosen for the great expedition were ready.

They consisted of a large company of archers wearing hauberks of chain-mail, twelve knights, magnificently armed

and accompanied by their esquires, and a thousand sword and spear men.

This great force started long before sunrise one morning, when London lay wrapped in silence and slumber. But when the silence was broken by the thunder of a legion of horses' feet the people leaped from their beds and rushed to their windows, where they stood lost in wonder.

For the expedition had been kept strictly secret save from a few; indeed, the men-at-arms had not yet been made acquainted with what was required of them.

In amaze the people saw Prince John armed at all points as for battle, and wearing over his armour a corsage, or long gown of crimson silk.

On his right hand rode Baron d'Orsay and on his left the king's marshal.

The rear was brought up by some halberdiers and cross-bowmen, and so they rode forth to kill the King of Sherwood Forest and strike terror into the heart of every Saxon in the land.

Little did Baron d'Orsay imagine that he had been tracked to London by Tom Ringer, one of Robin Hood's trusty scouts.

Disguised as a farm-servant, Tom saw the force of armed men leaving London slowly—for of a necessity a convoy was attached; then he rode with all speed back to Robin Hood, changing horses repeatedly, and scarcely resting until he reached the outlaw's forest retreat.

No sooner had he told his tale than fifty foresters were selected for the call to arms.

Robin Hood saw that a crisis was at hand, and that every man who could handle a bow or wield a sword would be needed.

At first he determined to meet Prince John on the road, but abandoned the project.

Friar Tuck and Little John were against giving battle in the open field. It would be better, they argued, to lie quiet in the forest, and once the Normans were in it, to harass them, and then drive them, if possible, into the very city of Nottingham.

A great task was before the Saxons. If they failed, then farewell to liberty,

as dear to them as their lives; but if victory crowned their efforts, then would the Normans be downhearted and loth to take up arms against them.

On the very night after the call to arms there came, under the cover of darkness, hundreds of sturdy men.

Most of them brought bows of yew and sheaves of arrows, thoroughly tested from fork to barb. Others came with swords, hunting-spears, and battle-axes, the whole making up a small but determined army of men.

Robin Hood set about organising his warriors into bands, and appointing officers over them.

On the morning of the very day that Prince John was expected to arrive Robin Hood inspected his men.

"I will not ask you to do anything but what I will do myself," he said. "Keep this in your mind when facing the foe. There must be no turning back, no shrinking, even if defeat threatens us. I will lead you, and I swear that rather than bend my knee to the tyrants I will leave my dead body on the field."

"And I," said Maid Marian, riding up on a snow-white palfrey, "will go with you! I am only a woman, but I have the heart of a man. Where else but at your side in the hour of this coming danger should I be?"

"Nay, sweetheart," said Robin Hood. "You shall not run so great a risk—"

"For once I will disobey you," Maid Marian interrupted, raising her head proudly. "Foresters of Sherwood, brave bowmen, Saxons! you, who cry aloud for the liberties your forefathers enjoyed, speak for me! Tell Robin Hood, your champion and your king, whether I am right or wrong!"

"By the saints! she is right," Friar Tuck said, coming forward. "Maid Marian can wield a sword, and, what is more, her presence will encourage the men. Nay, do not frown, or chop to pieces the meaning of my words. Look around you. These men have answered nobly to your call to arms, and there is not one among them but who is ready to lay down his life in your cause. But they love Maid Marian, too. Boadicea went into battle against the Romans.

She failed, it is true, but her name will never die. Maid Marian has spoken like a queen, and, if needs be, would strike a blow for the Saxons. Robin Hood, you should be prouder of her than ever."

"And I am," the outlaw said. "Marian, the voices of my good followers shall decide."

A shout went up, the meaning of which there was no mistaking, and Maid Marian, glowing with pride and pleasure, smiled at Robin Hood and rode away just as a whistle sounded.

"A stranger comes under escort of our scouts," said Friar Tuck.

"Ay, and a knight armed at all points, too, as I live," Little John cried. "There is a white pennon on his lance, the signal of truce, and, if I mistake not, he brings a message."

Robin Hood rode out to meet the knight, and greeted him right gallantly.

"So, Sir Knight," he said, "my men blindfolded you—a matter which I hope you will find excuse for. There, the bandage is removed."

The knight looked round him. He could see but few men, for at a signal from the outlaw the majority had dispersed and lay ambushed amid the thick green cover.

And among them, crawling silently on his hands and knees, Will Scarlet whispered instructions in case Robin Hood should call them out from their hiding-places.

"You say 'my men,'" the knight returned. "By that I gather you are in command here."

"I have that great honour," replied Robin; "and I am at your service, Sir Knight, if you come in the cause of right and justice."

"I am the bearer of a message to one known as Robin Hood."

"You behold him," the outlaw said. "Who sends the message?"

"His Highness Prince John, who, in the absence of King Richard, rules the kingdom."

"The Normans may submit to his rule, but the Saxons despise and defy it," Robin Hood retorted.

"That is a question I have not come to discuss," the knight said. "Here is

the message, under the prince's own seal. Read it, and give me your answer."

"That I will, and quickly, too," Robin Hood replied. "Ho, there, Will Scarlet! bid my men appear. Sir Knight, you will see that they are but poor peasants, hiding for safety in the forest."

Only a portion of the men who had lately come in stood up, leaving their weapons on the ground.

"These cannot be the redoubtable foresters I have heard of," the knight said.

"Roughly clad and poor as they are, they will not bend to the Norman yoke without striking a blow," Robin Hood said as he took the scroll from the knight's hand and snapped the seal.

A moment later he cried:

"Ha! Listen to this, men:

"Once again I command you, Robin Hood, falsely calling yourself King of Sherwood Forest, and as falsely declaring yourself to be the real Earl of Huntingdon, to surrender and throw yourself upon the clemency of the Crown, of which I am the representative."

"You hear that, my merry men," Robin said. "You hear how I am to give myself up—to go on my knees before a plotter and a usurper. But let me read on:

"Forasmuch it has come to my knowledge that you have caused one Winifreda Langridge to be abducted and falsely married to one Allan-a-Dale, and, moreover, that you did maltreat, beat, and rob Baron d'Orsay, a loyal subject. For all these things you must answer in person, or perish at the sword. And, furthermore, I command you to disband your so-called foresters, who, save in a few instances, shall receive a free pardon. Given at Nottingham on the tenth day of July, in the year of grace 1195."

"Upon my word," said Robin Hood, "this is a much stronger message than the last I had the honour of receiving from Prince John. Well, my merry men, what say you to it? What shall

be your answer? Say, shall I obey the prince's commands? You hear—he has promised pardon, save in a few instances, which means that my brave officers, too, must surrender. In what terms shall I reply?"

He was answered by loud shouts that rent the air.

"No surrender! Sweet liberty or death!"

"A thousand thanks," Robin Hood replied; then, facing the knight, he said: "I pray you forget not one word of the answer I send back by you. Tell Prince John that I and my brave followers treat his message with the scorn it deserves. Tell him that he lies. Tell him that our aim is to live in peace with all honest men, but that such tyrants as himself and those he encourages we defy."

"You had best reflect," the knight said. "The prince has come with the determination of putting a stop to this rebellion."

"Let him look at home; let him repent of his base sins before he sits in judgment on us," Robin Hood said. "But, Sir Knight, with you I will have none but fair words. Ho, there! Little John, bid Allan-a-Dale and his wife come hither and speak for themselves."

Allan-a-Dale, all smiles, approached, leading the none the less smiling Winifreda by the hand.

"Wife of Allan-a-Dale," Robin Hood said, "did I or any of my men abduct you and force you into a marriage?"

"No—before high Heaven, no!" Winifreda cried. "I was willing to marry Allan-a-Dale, and I am his true and happy wife."

"You hear?" said Robin Hood to the knight.

"Yes, and in all fairness it will be my duty to report what I hear."

"As to the marriage being false," said Friar Tuck, stepping forward, "I will answer for its validity."

"And now for D'Orsay," Robin Hood continued. "He complains of ill usage. Such a wretch is he that, had he been twenty years younger, he should not have escaped with his life. But Prince John knows him. They are birds of a feather, and I need no wizard to tell me

that the baron's gold has brought the prince and his men from London. Both prince and baron seek revenge. Let them take it, if they can. And now, Sir Knight, my scouts will blindfold you again, and in good time set you on your road. Fear not; no harm shall come to you."

Little John whipped a scarf over the knight's eyes, and handed him over to Friar Tuck.

Some hours later Prince John received the outlaw's defiant reply.

To fly into a fury was a common occurrence with the prince, but now his rage was terrible to behold.

"Sooner than be bearded by this rebel," he yelled, "I will burn Sherwood Forest and all the people in it. Look to it, all of you. There will be no turning back this time. The man who retreats—and I care not whether he be soldier or noble—shall hang!"

"For the love of Heaven, keep calm!" Baron d'Orsay pleaded. "Battles are not won with bursts of passion."

"How now, miserly old dotard, dare you dictate to me?" Prince John roared. "Was it not for you that I came here? What! I made my own terms? That is as good as saying I took a bribe from your vile hands. Out of my sight, doddering old fool, or the devil shall have his due earlier than he thinks!"

Overcome with secret rage and dismay, the baron fled, but the prince sped after him and clutched him by the throat.

"D'Orsay!" he hissed, "you will return in an hour's time, and, on your knees, sign a deed for ten thousand more nobles. Such is the fine I impose on you. You shall see that Richard's brother is not to be insulted with impunity. The fine for treason is confiscation of all property and death on the gibbet! Have a care that I do not exact the full penalty."

"Oh, that I was born to see this day!" D'Orsay cried, in horror-stricken accents. "Ten thousand nobles! Threatened with death! Great Heaven! if I have sinned, my punishment is bitter!"

Prince John burst into a loud laugh. "Remember that you fail not to

appear," he said. "And listen! See that you are in harness to-morrow at dawn, for then will I to Sherwood Forest. Who but the rich and proud Baron d'Orsay shall be second in command of my forces? And I'll see that you are never in the rear."

Nobles, knights, and soldiers looked askance at each other, but no man dared give utterance to his thoughts, for having sent D'Orsay away in a state bordering on frenzy, the prince returned and, flinging himself into a chair, drew his hood over his face and sat mumbling and gnashing his teeth as if talking to the Evil One.

One by one they slipped away, and at length left him alone.

Unaware that he was deserted, Prince John sat as motionless as a statue for the best part of an hour.

Suddenly he started to his feet and rushed from the tent, startling the sentries into bringing their halberds clattering to the ground.

"Where be these churls and fawning hounds?" he roared.

"Your highness," replied a sentinel, "I heard Sir Walter Greame whisper that it was your will to sleep, and give orders that you were not to be disturbed."

"Sir Walter Greame takes too much upon himself," the prince replied. "Well, I will sleep now, and see you that no man enters my tent save the messenger I have sent to Nottingham Castle. It is my will to remain here until Robin Hood is in my hands; then will I to the castle, and after I have seen the life torn out of him I will feast and make merry."

Returning to the tent, Prince John drank three goblets of wine in quick succession; and then he sank back and was soon asleep.

CHAPTER 5.

Right Against Might. — Another Saxon Victory.

Quite different scenes were taking place in Sherwood Forest.

Robin Hood passed among his men, smiling as he talked to them, while Maid Marian and the women busied

themselves in making the noble fellows comfortable.

In the evening a picnic on a vast scale was held in a great open glade.

"Hurrah! Hurrah for our noble king!" the foresters cried, raising their horn cups high above their heads. "Fear not but that we will give you another victory."

"My bowmen," Robin Hood replied, "I have faith in you, and I'll warrant that, come what may, the Normans shall have such a reception at your hands as those that come out of the fray will remember to the day of their deaths!"

"The greenwood tree—the greenwood tree—
All hail to the king of the greenwood tree!
We'll laugh and sing, and fight and shout,
And merrily kick the Normans out.

Ho, ho! Ha, ha! Ho, ho!
We'll kick the Normans out!"

So sang Little John, in such a deep, rich tone that, lost in admiration, Friar Tuck could only stare in wonder at him.

"Where have you been taking lessons, baby mine?" the friar demanded at length.

"Not from the croaking that comes from your throat," Little John replied. "Peace, friar! We'll be merry to-night, for to-morrow some of us may have no voices to sing with, and the rest will have no time to sing. Come, who will dance?"

Robin Hood was on his feet in an instant, and started the forest ball with Maid Marian, who laughed and blushed as he lifted her from her feet in his strong arms and whirled her round and round.

"Hurrah for Maid Marian, the Queen of Sherwood Forest!" Allan-a-Dale shouted. "Come, Winifreda! Come, wife! Ho! there, lads all, join hands and dance round the emblem of our liberty—the greenwood-tree!"

In a few minutes twice a hundred stalwart fellows joined hands, and when this enormous ring was formed away they went spinning, laughing, shouting, and kicking their heels round the great oak under which Robin Hood and Maid Marian had lately supped.

For some moments Friar Tuck, leaning on his quarter-staff, looked gravely

on. But soon his eyes began to twinkle, and his feet began to jig.

There is magic and witchery in dancing, and the friar felt that he must join in, or run clear away from the exhilarating sight.

At last he dashed in between Will Scarlet and Dick Driver, and seizing their hands danced as well as the best there.

His cassock and hood flowed out behind him in the light, summer breeze, his bald head shone as if it had been polished, his cheeks grew crimson, and he puffed and blew like a stranded whale.

The foresters roared with laughter at the sight of him; but what cared he? But at length he was compelled to cry, "Hold, enough!" and fell sprawling on his back amid a roar of laughter, for as the friar gave up, so did all for want of breath.

Little John went to Friar Tuck's rescue with a cup of light wine.

"My faith!" exclaimed the giant, "you did well!"

"I have not danced since the days of my youth," the friar panted. "Robin, and to all his merry men, I drink! Ay, and to the Normans, too! May every drop of sack they swallow turn to vinegar!"

Presently the sun sank, and as night would come on quickly Robin Hood announced that the feast was over, and that the time had come for the scouts to depart, and to post the sentries. Then absolute silence fell upon the scene.

At the first flash of dawn every man was astir. A hasty breakfast was partaken of, and no sooner had the attendants cleared away the horn cups, bowls, and platters, than some scouts came galloping in.

Prince John and his force were on the move. They were coming in open order, forming a half-circle, which evidently was intended to close up until complete, thus hemming the foresters in, so that attacks could be made at all points.

"Nothing could suit me better," Robin Hood said, laughing. "I did not think the Normans were so foolish,

for I know how worthless they are when not as thick as swarming bees and shoulder to shoulder. We will fight them in their own way. So, Marian, you are ready?"

He looked proudly at her as she came cantering up on her beautiful white palfrey.

"But what is this?" Robin Hood continued. "Allan-a-Dale's wife is with him!"

"She would come, an it please you," Allan-a-Dale said. "Winifreda says that, apart from her love of me, she owes you a debt which she must pay by accounting for at least one Norman."

"Say no more about it, or we shall have all the women flying to arms," Robin returned, in a half-vexed, half-amused tone of voice.

Then putting a silver whistle to his lips, he blew a loud, shrill call, and almost instantly the call to arms from a dozen horns resounded through the glade and through the long vistas of trees.

The foresters and cottagers who had come to help answered the call like magic.

Robin Hood and Maid Marian, on horseback, commanded the first division, Little John and Friar Tuck looked after the second, while the other two bands were in the charge of Will Scarlet and Allan-a-Dale, with whom was Winifreda, suitably attired, armed with bow and sword, and as eager as her husband for the fray.

At a word from Little John, the four divisions separated, and were led by their captains into thickets about three miles from the glade. Then such as had ridden dismounted, and some sturdy lads came and fetched the horses silently away.

Meanwhile the heavily-accoutréed Normans moved slowly but determinedly to the attack.

Confident in their armour and numbers, they gave no thought of defeat, but only wondered how many dead Saxons would be left on the field.

Robin Hood was to be taken alive, if possible, and after searching in his mind for the most suitable death to inflict

on the outlaw, Prince John had decided that before being killed he should be placed in an iron cage and drawn through the streets as a warning to all who defied the Norman rule.

From the Saxon line, extending more than a mile in length, there came no sound. Not a word was uttered; every eye was fixed upon that part of the forest where the Normans must come.

Suddenly the sun flashed upon a row of sharp lances, and the light sweeping down fell upon bright armour and still brighter shields.

On came the Normans in scores, in hundreds, their horses prancing, and their arms and armour making warlike music in the air.

The hearts of men of lesser courage than Robin Hood and his followers would have sickened, but the sight of the imposing force only caused them to compress their lips, and to wait for the word of command.

It came at last, and then, as hundreds of bows twanged, death and confusion fell upon the Normans.

Out tumbled more than fifty from the saddle, and as many maddened horses dashed wildly about, until caught or struck down by the battle-axes of the footmen.

"Rally! rally!" Prince John thundered. "Down with the Saxon dogs!"

"Death to the Norman tyrants!" Robin Hood retorted. "We fight for honour and liberty; you for greed and power. Heaven is on our side, and the day will be ours!"

"Forward, then!" Prince John cried. "Forward, and give no quarter!"

The Norman archers sprang to the front, and having delivered a flight of arrows fell back to let the footmen, armed with halberds and battle-axes, pass through.

Once more hundreds of bows twanged, and the long, sharply-tipped arrows seemed to pass through the Normans as if they were paper.

Down they went by the dozen, shrieking, cursing, praying, entreating; and then, without waiting for a second volley, the remainder turned and fled to cover.

Finding that the foresters had an-

ticipated his plan of attack, and had, in fact, led the Normans into an ambuscade, Prince John decided upon a great charge of cavalry.

With his heart swelling with rage, he saw his archers and halberdiers huddled in heaps like frightened sheep, while the hissing of arrows from those invisible bows so splendidly handled by Robin Hood and his merry men sounded unpleasantly in his ears.

The prince sat astride a huge black horse, armed at all points, but not disdaining the shelter of a great oak-tree. and at his side was Baron d'Orsay, blinking feebly through the visor of his helmet, and wishing himself a thousand miles away.

"Baron," Prince John said, smiling maliciously at the old man, "I see that you are trembling with anxiety to lead the charge. So be it! Ride to the front, and set our brave warriors a good example."

"Will you not come with me, prince?" D'Orsay demanded.

"Trust me, I will not be far away," Prince John replied; "but at present my place is here. On, on! Charge, D'Orsay, charge! On, Normans, on!"

"Remember how your forefathers fought at Hastings!" D'Orsay shrieked. "Down with the Saxons, your bonds-men and your slaves!"

"Sweet liberty or death!" Robin Hood shouted in defiant reply.

Little John repeated the words with a mighty shout, and then like a peal of thunder the battle-cry of the Saxons rolled down the line.

"One more flight of arrows, and then take to your weapons of steel!" Robin Hood cried. "Ho, there! pass that command along, and see that it is obeyed!"

Like an avalanche the Norman cavalry swept along, the earth shaking under them.

"Death to the Saxons! Spare Robin Hood! The prince commands that he shall be taken alive."

Such were the cries of the Normans as they came on like a wall of steel.

Then the air grew dark with arrows, and the steel-clad host wavered as though the earth reeled beneath them.

The flower of Prince John's cavalry, thinned and stricken with death and wounds, closed up; but before they could charge again Robin Hood and four hundred of his men were upon them.

Thrown from his horse, D'Orsay staggered about, striking right and left, until sent reeling to the earth by a sword wielded by the hand of a woman.

"Go back, Winifreda!" Allan-a-Dale shouted. "You have kept your promise, but for the love of heaven go back now!"

She obeyed him, without knowing who it was that she had struck down.

The Saxons rushed to the charge with every conceivable weapon capable of thrusting, parrying, and hacking.

The mighty Little John made haste to join Robin Hood and Maid Marian, and wherever he went his great axe swept a clear circle.

The mighty blade was like a vision of sudden death, and wherever it fell a Norman fell, too.

And now came the reckoning for the boasting Prince John to settle. His men were flying like chaff before the wind. Horsemen trampled down footmen, and they, rendered savage at being deserted, called the knights cowards and struck at them.

"No quarter!" had been the cry of the Normans, and it was not likely that the Saxons would give any.

It was a case of every man for himself, and certain death for the hindermost.

Through the forest and right into the town of Nottingham, Robin Hood and his merry men chased the tyrants, and here the Normans made a stand, for others poured out of the castle to reinforce them.

"Loved one," Robin Hood said to Maid Marian, "I pray you retire to the forest. The fight is not over, and there is danger at every step."

"I will not leave your side," she replied.

"You must—you shall!" he cried, in tones of command. "See you not that I am wanted where the Normans crowd upon my men and press them hard?

For the love of heaven, do not hinder me, Marian!"

She understood him then, and, placing herself under the escort of two Saxons, turned back from the town.

Maid Marian had scarcely left his side when some Normans, bursting through the crowd, recognised Robin Hood by his splendid costume and made at him.

Once the outlaw were dead or captured, the Saxons would lose heart and surrender, so the Normans thought, and here was a chance to put an end to the awful conflict.

Separated from his followers, Robin Hood backed under an archway, determined to die a hundred deaths rather than surrender.

And death was staring him in the face when a cheery voice rang like music upon his ears.

"Courage, good Robin," cried Friar Tuck. "The man of peace is coming. Ho, ho! for Normans with broken heads. Here's at you, varlets! English oak against Norman steel."

The jolly friar had appeared like an apparition. Where he had sprung from Robin Hood could not conjecture; but there he was, as sound as a bell, quarter-staff in hand, and fighting like twenty men rolled into one.

It was a mercy that the quarter-staff did not fly into a hundred pieces under the tremendous blows that he dealt.

"Silly loons!" said Friar Tuck. "I did not think they would tumble down so easily. Come along, Robin. You are wanted yonder."

"Friar!" replied Robin Hood, "what form can my gratitude take? This is not the first time that you have saved my life."

"All I ask is to end my days in your service," the friar said. "Ho, look yonder. See how bold Little John and Will Scarlet make the varlets reel."

Robin Hood grasped the friar's hand, and, giving it a hearty shake, dashed again into the thick of the conflict.

Like a giant refreshed, and encouraging his followers with the ever-exhilarating shout, "Sweet liberty or death!" he laid about him with his double-edged sword.

Once more the Normans reeled, wavered, and broke.

The narrow streets were full of men flying before the avengers. Many crowded into the castle, but no sooner was the courtyard full than the teeth of the portcullis met, and the drawbridge came down with a rattle and a crash.

And Prince John was there, livid, and filled with the rage of a thwarted fiend.

The Saxons were victors. Their cries of triumph pierced the walls, yet he could not believe it.

Was the medley of bruised and panting men all that was left of the splendid force he had ridden at the head of? Where were his knights, his bowmen, his hundreds of lancers?

He could not believe the evidence of his senses. He saw and heard, but he saw and heard like a man spellbound and staring helplessly at a horrid vision. What was his boast worth now?

What would the people say when he returned to London, and the tale of how he had been vanquished was told?

They would laugh at him and fling the name of Robin Hood in his teeth.

As he stood grinding his teeth, there came a noise from the far end of the courtyard.

The Normans had something to boast of. They had taken a prisoner, and his name was Allan-a-Dale.

They dragged him forward without ceremony, and cruelly, although the poor lad was half-stunned and bleeding from several wounds.

Yet he held his head up proudly and met Prince John's savagely glaring eyes fearlessly.

"Ho, Gustave!" said the prince. "Sheath your sword in this knave's body and then throw it into the moat. Stay! though; I would know his name."

"I am Allan-a-Dale."

The prince, taken by surprise, fell back a step.

"What! Allan-a-Dale, the stripling who robbed Baron d'Orsay of his bride?"

"No other," Allan-a-Dale replied. "Prince, I am in your power, and I

crave but one favour. The good monks taught me to write, and I would indite a letter to my wife saying that I died as a man should die—that I died loving her and blessing her name with my last breath."

"By the bones of the Conqueror, you shall have time to think over something longer than such a short message," the prince rejoined, with a malignant grin; "but whether it reaches your wife is quite another question. Away with him! Perchance the baron may reach the castle, and welcome to him indeed will be the sight of Allan-a-Dale."

CHAPTER 6.

An Escape of Prisoners.

MANY changes had taken place at Nottingham Castle since the death of Oswald de Burgh.

Prince John was full of caprices in the matter of choosing his right-hand men, but at length he found a man after his own heart in the person of Sir Henwick Beauclerc, a veritable savage.

This Norman knight was, according to the prince's idea, the proper individual to rule and tax the Saxons, but what suited John much better was the fact that Sir Henwick was not only rich but liberal with his gold.

Sir Henwick Beauclerc had been to the Crusades, and returned to England laden with the spoils of the East. For gold and gems he had taken innocent lives, like many other scoundrels who, under the cloak of religion, went forth with pious faces, but with hearts as black as night.

This was not the case with all the Crusaders. There were thousands of good and earnest men among them, men who broke their swords and turned in disgust from the thieving rabble they were compelled to associate with.

But to return to our story.

Sir Henwick Beauclerc reached the castle soon after Allan-a-Dale had been brought in, and was as delighted as the prince that even one of Robin Hood's followers was a prisoner.

To the lowest and dirtiest dungeon Allan-a-Dale was dragged, his captors

jeering and laughing as they hustled him along the cold, damp passages.

"It would have been a pity," said one tawny-haired ruffian, "for Gustave to kill him. The prince will have some rare sport with him, I'll be bound."

"That is true enough," said another, grinning into Allan-a-Dale's face. "Oh, oh! our young friend from the forest shall have a merry time!"

"You pitiful dogs," Allan-a-Dale sneered. "If you think that such talk as yours will affright me, I tell you that you waste your breath. I can quite believe that the devil himself is not capable of such cruelty as you Normans; but you shall see how a Saxon can die."

"Come, then," said one of the men, as they halted before a door studded with rusty nails; "we will see how you like your lodging at Nottingham Castle."

Unlocking the dungeon, the ruffian stepped in.

"This dungeon has a history," he said with a loud guffaw. "Some of its occupants have been eaten alive by rats!"

"Wretches! Demons!" Allan-a-Dale cried. "Woe to you all on that great day when you will be called upon to give an account of your doings in this world."

As the brutal retainers were roaring with laughter, men appeared dragging another prisoner along. He was clad in Lincoln green, and seemed more dead than alive. His head had fallen on his breast, so low that his features were completely concealed; but as he made a great effort and raised his face, Allan-a-Dale started.

"What, Much! Much the Miller's son!" he gasped. "Is it indeed you?"

"Yes," was the feeble reply. "I was felled with a halberd, and before I could scramble to my feet a dozen knaves fought for possession of me, like a pack of famished wolves."

At that moment Gustave, the burly gaoler, attended by two torch-bearers, came up.

"Ho, ho!" laughed he. "So you two knaves need no introduction. Well, you will be able to console each other.

It is bad to be alone, especially when rats and adders grow troublesome. In you go, dogs! Ho, there! close the door after them, and I will see to the fastenings."

Gustave held the master-key of all the dungeons, and again and again did he test the lock and bolts.

For some moments neither of the young foresters spoke. Both were in sore straits, and to add to their miseries the dungeon was almost as black as pitch.

At length Much spoke.

"How did it happen to you, Allan-a-Dale?" he asked.

"I hardly know," Allan replied. "I just remember seeing Robin Hood and Friar Tuck dash past, carrying all before them, when I tripped, or was caught by the heels, and down I went. Then slash came a sword, cutting my face. The blow was intended for my throat, and had it taken effect my head would have spun from my shoulders like a top. And then—but what need to tell you more? I was brought to the castle, like yourself."

"Would that giving my life to these wretches would save yours!" Much said, nobly. "Robin Hood will miss us. He will come to our rescue and lay siege to the castle; but it will take time, for every part has been strengthened, and days, ay, perchance weeks, may pass before our noble chief could hope to gain an entrance."

"I do not despair of escaping," Allan-a-Dale said. "Remember, I am a blacksmith, and know many a trick."

"My heart is stout enough," Much replied, "but it does not bid me hope, unless they keep us here for some days, and that I doubt."

"Hope! Is there not always hope where there is life?" Allan-a-Dale replied vehemently. "There is a loop-hole far above our heads, or we should not be able to see our fingers in this filthy den. If we could only reach it all might be well."

"And think you," said Much, "that these brutes will not return and load us with chains? The savage gaoler with wolf-like teeth has only gone for orders."

No sooner were the words spoken than the door flew open and Gustave and his attendants appeared.

"I have brought you pretty things to wear," he said, jangling some manacles. "They are not so heavy as we generally put on men, but I trow they will prove strong enough for you."

Much the Miller's son was secured first; but in fitting a chain of steel round Allan-a-Dale's wrist a link snapped, and Gustave, muttering angrily, flung the whole set on the dungeon floor.

"I must put the armourer to work," he said. "To-morrow will do. See; we have brought you meat, bread, and water, at the command of a prince. He says that he likes game to be lively, otherwise it gives no sport."

The door crashed, the lock and bolts creaked, and then all was quiet again.

Disheartening as the chaining of Much was, it filled Allan with a stronger determination to escape.

And Much, too, weak as he was, tried to slip his fetters, and with such desperation that, icily cold as the dungeon was, great beads of perspiration dropped from his face, and at length, overcome with the exertion, he sank back, almost swooning.

"Make no further effort as yet," Allan-a-Dale said. "We will eat, drink, and take courage. Friend, I will soon be free, and set you at liberty. You shake your head; you think I rave —you think I am mad! Wait and see."

Allan spoke in such a confident tone that Much dragged his weary limbs to the stone bench and smiled as he stretched himself out at full length.

"Before we dine," Allan-a-Dale said cheerfully, "I will dress our wounds. I have the wherewithal in my wallet, which, good luck, escaped the varlets' notice. And, faith, too, here is a small flask of wine, which Winifreda must have slipped in. Open your mouth, Much, and drink in new life."

"You need new life yourself," Much replied. "Drink first."

"Tush, man! you will anger me!" Allan said. "There is enough for both."

"Thanks — thanks, good Allan," Much murmured, after the wine had flowed down his throat. "Heaven bless you for one of the noblest of our band. Now tell me your plan."

"To find means to reach the loophole," Allan-a-Dale replied. "Failing that, I do not despair of opening the dungeon door, but I must have strength. So let us eat and sleep. Without rest nothing can be done."

"You fill my heart with hope," said Much the Miller's son. "I will leave all in your hands. Heaven send that we may be left undisturbed."

So weary were they that in a few minutes both were fast asleep; but, alas! the waking was to be one of trouble.

Allan-a-Dale opened his eyes and started up as the dungeon door flew open and a great flaring light fell upon his face. He saw before him four men, whose faces were scarcely human. Each had small, piercing eyes, low, receding foreheads, and thin and almost bloodless lips.

They were the torturers of Nottingham Castle!

Behind them stood Prince John, and, horrors of horrors! Baron d'Orsay, every nerve in his body quivering with exultation and thoughts of revenge.

Much the Miller's son woke, too, and suppressed a groan of despair as he saw who had come to the dungeon.

Gustave the gaoler now came to the front, and thrusting a torch into an iron socket folded his arms and stood silent.

"Bring these knaves to the torture-chamber!" Prince John said suddenly.

The torturers pounced on them and bore them off to a room with a vaulted roof at the far end of the passage. Here were instruments dreadful enough in appearance to strike terror into the stoutest heart. In the middle of the chamber stood a brazier, filled with glowing coals, and bristling with iron bars already red hot.

On the walls were contrivances to torture the limbs—spiked bands for wrists and ankles, and ropes and pulleys for the purpose of dislocating the sockets of hapless victims.

Allan-a-dale and Much the Miller's son looked unmoved on this hideous paraphernalia, while Prince John and Baron d'Orsay frowned savagely.

"Baron," the prince said, in a low tone of voice, "I will keep my promise; you shall speak first."

The baron advanced and raised his beady eyes to Allan-a-Dale's face, but took great care to keep beyond the reach of the young blacksmith's arm.

"Low-born varlet," D'Orsay said, "would you keep your life?"

"Ay, that would I," Allan-a-Dale replied. "I would keep it, if only for the chance of taking yours. Robin Hood knows that he erred on the side of mercy when he sent you home doused with pond water."

"This is only bravado," the baron said. "Look around you."

"I am not blind," Allan-a-Dale retorted. "I see the ingenuity of the devil and some of his demons. What next? Say on."

"Listen!" the baron rejoined. "You are young, and your blood courses quickly in your veins, keeping time with your tongue. It is true that Robin Hood has gained what he considers a victory—"

"My faith," interrupted Much the Miller's son, "what do you Normans call a defeat?"

"Prince John has sworn to hunt every man in Lincoln green out of Sherwood Forest," D'Orsay went on, "and to take the life of that foul traitor and outlaw, Robin Hood."

"If that be so," said Allan, tossing his head, "he has made several experiments, and is quite welcome to make another."

Stung to the quick by these words, and losing all patience, Prince John thrust the baron on one side.

"You seem to prefer being tortured to liberty and honour!" he thundered.

"Honour!" exclaimed Allan and Much in a breath.

"Yes, honour, and wealth, too," the prince replied. "If by playing the part of spies you betray Robin Hood, Little John, and Friar Tuck into my hands, not only shall your lives be spared, but you shall be knighted and made rich."

"Allan-a-Dale," said Much the Miller's son, "answer for me. You know what to say."

"Craven prince," Allan-a-Dale cried, "we refuse to do your bidding."

The torturers moved forward without waiting for the signal, and dragged Allan-a-Dale towards the brazier.

Baron D'Orsay was about to give them an order when Prince John seized him by the shoulder and whispered a few words in his ear.

"I see," the baron said chokingly. "You think that they may relent. But why not torture them? See how they care for you and your threats. Look at them. They are smiling into each other's faces."

"We will give them time to talk the matter over," the prince said. "If we torture them now, they may die. Away with them back to the dungeon," he added. "If to-morrow morn I find them still obstinate, I will put them to the torture with my own hands."

Two minutes later the captives were again locked in the dungeon.

"Now, Much, my friend," said Allan, "there is no time to lose. I must reach the loophole, escape, and return with something to remove those accursed chains from you. Place your hands against the wall and stand firm."

In a few moments Allan was standing upon Much's shoulders, but still the sill of the loophole was beyond his reach.

"It must be done," he said, alighting softly on the dungeon floor. "Can you bear my weight if I take a running jump?"

"Anything—anything, only make haste!" Much replied in an agony of apprehension. "If those monsters return and chain you, all hope will be lost."

Stepping back as far as the door, Allan took two rapid strides, and then—after the time-worn mode of acrobats—ran, as it were, up Much the Miller's son's back and leaped.

He caught at the bars protecting the loophole, but so old and rusty were they that they nearly came off in his hand.

Wrenching them away, he lowered them to Much, and then crawled through the aperture.

He had known that the dungeon was underground, but he was astonished to find that the water of the moat lay only a few feet under him.

The water was stagnant, green, and in some places thick with mire, and although Allan was a swift and powerful swimmer, his heart turned sick at the thought of wading through such a mess, for since Robin Hood had found his way into the castle no attempt had been made to clean the moat.

Under any other circumstances Allan-a-Dale would have turned away from such a task, but now he had no choice, and slipping in, he waded until his feet no longer touched the muddy bed of the moat, and then he struck out for dear life. How he reached the other side he never knew.

Clogged with weeds and gripped as it were by slimy hands, his senses reeled, but at length he found himself lying amid some tall, swaying reeds.

Then crawling along he reached the bank, and rolling helplessly over, fell upon the portly form of Friar Tuck.

CHAPTER 7.

Prince John's Flight. — Robin Hood Captures the Castle.

THEN came oblivion. Allan-a-Dale swooned, and on opening his eyes found himself in a comfortable bed drawn to an open window, so that he might have the full advantage of the soft summer breeze.

Night had come, and the stars were twinkling as if they wondered what all the commotion below meant.

Near the bed stood Robin Hood, Little John, and Friar Tuck.

They had not waited for Allan-a-Dale to come to his senses.

It was not hard to tell the place where he had escaped from, and no sooner had the sun set than Robin and two foresters, crossing the moat on two planks bound together, had lowered a rope through the loophole and rescued Much the Miller's son.

And that very handy young forester lay sound asleep in the next room.

When all this was told to Allan-a-Dale he went nearly mad with joy.

It seemed too good to be true, and with tears of gratefulness he begged for particulars of the rescue.

"There is no time for that," Robin Hood said. "Let it suffice that it is done, and that we are all proud of you, Allan-a-Dale."

"By St. Anthony! that is true," Friar Tuck added. "But, hark you, my bonny boy, next time you take a fancy to fall upon anyone, choose not a man of peace, but a great, swaggering, axe-wielding giant like Little John. My faith, when you came down upon my crown methought the wall had crumbled in on me!"

"The mud on him was the same colour as your cassock," Little John said, "so what did it matter?"

"We will have fun enough when our work is done," Robin Hood said. "Be at rest while we are away, Allan, for the house is well guarded, and not a Norman durst show his nose in the streets of Nottingham to-night. We return to the castle."

"What! are there more prisoners there?" Allan-a-Dale demanded, in amazement and alarm.

"Not men in Lincoln green," Robin Hood replied; "but," he added significantly, "I trow there will be several others before dawn."

At that moment a man entered the room, clad as a Norman citizen.

"What does that fellow want here?" Allan demanded, starting.

"To take you by the hand," was the reply. "What! is my disguise so perfect? Do you not know me? I am Will Scarlet."

"I swear by the saints that your own mother would not know you!" Allan cried.

Will Scarlet laughed merrily.

"That is good news," he said, "for I have a ticklish task to perform. Yonder is the castle, Allan. You can see it plainly from the window. When you see a light flare from the top of the keep you will know that Robin Hood is—"

"What he is," the outlaw interrupted. "It is Robin Hood's boast to say that he is the leader of the finest body of men that ever drew breath. Come! Are we ready?"

"Yes," Little John replied.

"And the men posted as I instructed?"

"I have seen to all that," Will Scarlet replied.

Then they passed out, leaving Allan-a-Dale to gaze out upon the sweet, still night, his heart swelling with thankfulness, and a prayer on his lips for the safety of Robin Hood and his merry men.

Let us follow them.

On leaving the house, which was in one of the narrowest streets, shadows that resolved themselves into armed men came forward to greet them, and as quickly retired.

On reaching the end of the street the four separated quickly, Will Scarlet creeping along under the overhanging gables of the houses, and making his way towards the castle. Once a man spoke to him from a half-open door.

"Take care," he said. "You are a Norman, I see. The place is full of Saxons, and, if they catch you, they will put you to death."

"I know that I carry my life in my hand," Will Scarlet replied. "However, I must reach the castle. I have a message to deliver."

"Say you so? Know you Gustave the gaoler?"

"Who has not heard of him?" Will Scarlet rejoined.

"Every true Norman, I trow, within fifty miles."

"Yes, yes; but what of him?"

"Tell him that his friend Pritchell wishes to see him as soon as he can leave the castle."

"That sounds all very well," Will Scarlet replied, "but you may be more an enemy than a friend of his. If your message is of importance give it me, or at least something he may recognise."

"It is not necessary. The very mention of my name will be sufficient to assure you a welcome," Pritchell replied.

"Good! I will not forget."

"These two men have been up to some villainy," Will Scarlet thought, laughing in his sleeve. "Luck follows me. I can go now with more boldness and ask for Gustave, but I will alter

the message—yes, I will alter the message to suit my own purpose."

And now, although he appeared to be ignorant of the fact, men dived round corners and emerged out of narrow entries and all sorts of lonesome places, and followed Will Scarlet, until he stood within the black shadow of the grim castle, and then the figures melted away, sinking, as it were, into the very earth.

Turning from the path that led to the massive gates communicating with the drawbridge when it was lowered, Will Scarlet worked his way round to where the moat, horseshoe in shape, and the granite wall came down straight to the ground.

Here was a door of solid iron, with another on the other side of it. Beyond was a narrow passage, with another iron door, midway, and, further on, a stone staircase leading to diverging corridors, one to the upper part of the castle, one to the dungeons, and the third to the great kitchens, buttery, and pantries of the vast establishment, which, in time of war, was capable of lodging and boarding five hundred men.

That night all doors were made fast, Sir Henwick Beauclerc going the rounds himself, and then returning to the banqueting-hall to dine with Prince John and Baron d'Orsay.

The dinner was more of a council of war than feast. There was no merry conversation, no laughter, and silence reigned in the minstrels' gallery.

"I'll away at dawn," Prince John said, "but will return, and, if needs be, every man in the realm capable of bearing arms shall be put into the field against this arch-rebel, Robin Hood."

"And the prisoners? Will you leave them to me?" Baron d'Orsay demanded, a sudden glare coming into his eyes.

"I will visit them at midnight," the prince replied. "If I find them obstinate, then may they look to Heaven for mercy, for they shall look in vain to me."

In the meanwhile Gustave the gaoler had not been idle. He had planted men in all parts of the castle, especially near the approach to the banqueting-hall, and having satisfied himself that if the

Saxons gained entrance to the castle they would do so through solid masonry, he took charge of the postern lodge himself, and prepared to make himself comfortable.

The armourer came to see him once, but Gustave dismissed the man curtly, saying that no chains would be required for Allan-a-Dale, as it was more than likely that he would be in his grave before sunrise.

Down in the lodge, amid stone walls and damp passages, the air was raw and cold, and Gustave the gaoler, with the keys hanging at his side, sat at a fire of logs.

"Pretchell," he murmured, "spoke of a Saxon who has hidden treasure. As soon as Nottingham is quiet again I must see into this."

At that moment Gustave started, and hastened to take down a heavy sword hanging from a lail in the wall.

Someone was knocking at the outer gate, knocking loudly, and making no bones about the matter.

Gustave was a cunning fellow, and not the sort of one to walk into a trap with his eyes open. If the man knocking there thought he would throw the door open and admit him, that man was vastly mistaken, and would perhaps get a sword-thrust in his ribs, through the double-barred grill, for his pains.

"Knock on," Gustave said, smiling to himself. "Make as much noise as you like, and then go away. It is all the same to me. It will help to keep me awake."

But the knocking became so persistent that Gustave began to lose his temper.

Unsheathing his sword, he stole out of the lodge and crept on tiptoe to the double doors.

Swinging the first silently aside, he unlatched the grill, and keeping his face away from it, lest a Saxon arrow should make a sudden appearance, he demanded who was there.

"It is I—Guillaume Lontaine," replied Will Scarlet, in good Norman French. "I am the bearer of a message—"

"Give it, then," Gustave interrupted. "No man, I care not whether he be

prince or peasant, will enter the castle to-night."

"Then I have taken much trouble and run much risk for nothing," Will Scarlet said. "My message is to one Gustave, the gaoler."

"What of him?"

"That I will not tell to a stranger," Will Scarlet replied. "The message was delivered to me by one Pretchell."

"What! say so? Repeat that name!"

Will Scarlet did so, and then Gustave's cunning eyes began to glitter.

"I am Gustave himself," he said, inclining his ear towards the grill. "Say on, friend."

"Nay," Will Scarlet responded. "I have my instructions, and will obey them. Gustave, so Pretchell told me, was a burly man, with red hair, and he warned me against speaking to any other. As I cannot be admitted to see Gustave, I will go away."

"Stay," said the gaoler. "Keep back and let me see you. Attempt me harm, and you shall die!"

Squeezing his face close to the grill, he tried to make out what Will Scarlet was like. He could only see that the man with the message was not attired as a Saxon.

"Are you alone?" Gustave demanded.

"Think you that I should be fool enough to bring Robin Hood with me, for company's sake?" Will Scarlet demanded.

This answer seemed to assure Gustave. He unlocked the massive iron door and swung it open.

In so doing he lowered his sword, and seeing that the bearer of the message had no weapon in his hands, he kept the point downwards.

"Now," said he, as Will Scarlet entered, "what has this Pretchell told you?"

"Hush!" Will Scarlet replied. "Walls have ears, so they say. Bend down your head, that I may whisper."

Gustave, never dreaming but that he had an innocent Norman yeoman to deal with, did so.

In a moment Will Scarlet had the gaoler by the throat in an iron grip, and threw him on his back.

The attack was so sudden that, ere

Gustave could recover from his surprise, he was bound and gagged by some men who glided through the still-open door like shadows.

As in a dream he saw Will Scarlet possess himself of the keys, and then, mad with rage, he began to struggle like a bound panther.

But a knock on his head, judiciously administered, had the effect of quieting him, and having been made fast to a chain in the lodge, he sat staring so stupidly, and presenting such a ridiculous spectacle, that the foresters found it difficult to keep from roaring with laughter.

He was left in charge of two men, while, headed by Will Scarlet, others swarmed in.

Door after door was thrown open, and then, throwing off all reserve, the foresters, shouting: "Sweet liberty or death! No Normans! England for Saxons!" put to flight the astounded guards.

Away they rushed to the outer lodge, yelling:

"Up with the portcullis! Lower the drawbridge! Robin Hood is here!"

The retreat took the form of a wild stampede. The men threw away their weapons and anything that encumbered them.

A side-door communicating with the moat was burst open, and many leaped it, and scrambling across rolled helplessly into the very arms of Robin Hood and his followers waiting for them.

Will Scarlet had done his work well, and Robin Hood's heart was filled with delight.

"Spare unarmed men, although they have never given us quarter," he cried. "Hurrah! the castle is in our hands!"

Hearing the noise, Prince John rushed from the banqueting-hall, and, mingling with the flying throng, dashed with Sir Henwick Beauclerc into a secret passage. Dropping out of the window, the prince fell ignominiously into the street.

The sheriff followed, rolling over him, but Baron d'Orsay was not lucky. The door of the secret passage was slammed in his face, and failing to find the spring, he ran up and down the

banqueting-hall like a rat in a trap, until he was caught and pinioned by a forester.

The men in the outer lodge made haste to set the machinery in motion. Up went the portcullis, and down went the drawbridge, with a crash that strained it from end to end.

The outer gate was already open, for the men who had guarded it had fled, only to be made prisoners.

Then Robin Hood, Little John, Friar Tuck, and some forty Saxons poured, cheering themselves hoarse, into the castle.

They were met in the great lodge by Will Scarlet, out of breath, but beaming with triumph.

Only a hasty shake of the hand passed between the King of Sherwood Forest and his faithful officer, and away all went through stately room and dismal dungeon, liberating prisoners, destroying stacks of arms, bunting, and Norman trophies from the walls.

In the kitchen the wretched servants huddled, expecting nothing less than instant death. But Robin Hood proved that he could be as merciful as he was powerful.

"Prepare us a feast," he said to the trembling head cook. "I trow your larders are full enough and to spare for our requirements. Baron d'Orsay shall be our guest, and drink a bumper of wine to Robin Hood and his men, who are as brave as they are merry. Ho, there, some of you! Go fetch Allan-a-Dale and Much the Miller's son, and let the news go forth that I am not only King of Sherwood Forest, but Sheriff of Nottingham."

The foresters roared at this, and the servants, gaining courage, laughed, too.

Robin Hood had but one thing to regret. Prince John had escaped, but the outlaw drew a picture in his mind of the degradation the prince must feel, and laughed as loudly as the rest.

"Loot the castle," he said, "and let everything go to the poor. I command it as sheriff. Ha, ha, ha!"

All this was gall and wormwood to Baron d'Orsay, who was compelled to witness the joyous scene.

"We'll have music and song to-night," Robin Hood said as he led the way to the banqueting-hall.

In less than an hour Much the Miller's son and Allan-a-Dale were seated amid the joyous throng, forgetting their past troubles, and almost their old light-hearted selves again.

Far into the night the festivities were kept up—indeed, few of the foresters thought of sleeping.

Baron d'Orsay sat near Robin Hood, and was carefully guarded, but no insult was offered to the old man, and scarcely a word did he say, until Little John touched him on the shoulder and led him to the foot of the drawbridge.

Brightly the sun was shining, gilding the towers and spires and the red, sloping roofs of the quaintly-built houses.

"Baron," said Little John, "Robin Hood has ordered that you shall have a choice of being hanged or shot at from the top of the keep. Were you a younger man Allan-a-Dale would cross swords with you—indeed, if you refuse Robin Hood's offer, he will do so."

"This is murder!" the baron gasped.

"Nay, it is justice," Little John replied. "He who makes sauce should not be afraid to eat it. You talk of murder. Heaven! how many innocent lives have you on your own hands?"

Baron d'Orsay looked around him and shuddered. Whatever his choice might be, he felt that he was taking his last look on the earth.

"If," he said, glancing upwards, "the arrows miss me, what then?"

"You shall go free as far as Robin Hood's vengeance is concerned, but take care to hide yourself quickly, and get to a distant part of the country, for there are many scores against you. Choose, and at once," Little John added sternly.

"Who stands ready with bow on the keep?" Baron d'Orsay demanded, in faltering accents.

"Allan-a-Dale," Little John replied. "But he can be called, and will come down if you need his services."

"I will go," the baron said.

"Then yonder lies your way," Little John responded, giving him a push.

As the baron ran across the drawbridge, which had been lowered for his convenience, the giant sounded a whistle shrilly.

D'Orsay heard it, and quickened his pace. Up on the turret there appeared a flash of green and gold, and then another flash—or, rather, a jet of light, as a steel-tipped arrow sped through the air.

On went the barbed messenger, taking a downward course swifter than any swallow ever flew.

Suddenly the tip of the arrow ceased to glitter in the sunlight, and Baron d'Orsay threw up his arms and fell dead.

While this was going on, Prince John and Sir Henwick Beauclerc were hiding in a shepherd's hut.

Of all the men that had come to Nottingham with the prince, not one remained at his side.

They were scattered in wandering groups about the country, making for London with all speed.

The shepherd with whom Prince John and Sir Henwick lodged, was a Norman, and, although he bowed almost to the ground, he knew that he held them in the hollow of his hand, and made up his mind to fleece them.

The prince and the sheriff were in such a state of terror that they put aside their rich attire and disguised themselves in the coarse smocks worn by labourers, and altered the cut of their beards and hair.

High up on a hill, the lonely hut looked down upon the town of Nottingham, and both the prince and sheriff were anxious to know how matters were proceeding.

The shepherd undertook to take the journey, and, locking his guests in, started, chuckling and crowing with delight, for he had helped himself freely from Prince John's purse.

"My faith!" said he, as he strode along, "it is not often that a man of my station entertains royal blood and dips his fingers in the purse of a prince."

It was midday when he reached Nottingham, and there he saw the strangest of sights.

Crowds of poor people were wending

their way towards the castle, laughing and chatting, as if the shadows of care had never fallen on their paths.

Robin Hood was now master of the castle, and his foresters had proclaimed him sheriff, bidding all who had suffered wrong or robbery to go to him for redress.

At the foot of the drawbridge was a wonderful spectacle. Seated in a chair, with several open coffers close to his hand, and guarded by a hundred men in Lincoln green, Robin Hood was handing money to the oppressed Saxons.

Even some of the poor Normans had crept timidly up to the King of Sherwood Forest, complaining of hardships, and Robin, in the goodness of his heart, relieved them, bidding them give "the lie" to any man who maligned him.

"No groat of this shall go to supply a want of mine," he was saying, as the shepherd stole into the crowd. "This money was stolen, and I return it to you. Go your ways, good people, and rest assured that I will always be ready to protect you in the hour of need."

"Give!" said the shepherd, thrusting out both hands. "I have a wife and ten children, all of whom are starving."

"By our Lady! you must eat the bread that should find its way to their mouths, for you are a strong and lusty varlet," the outlaw said, looking him full and sternly in the eyes. "What is your name?"

"I am known as Haspard."

"Your calling?" demanded Robin.

"I tend sheep on yonder hills," Haspard replied.

"And for whom do you work?" was the outlaw's next question.

"Sir Henwick Beauclerc," Haspard responded; "but since it seems that he has taken to flight, master have I none."

"There you err," Robin Hood said, laughing. "I am sheriff now, and claim the sheep you speak of. Some of my men shall return with you and help to drive them in, all save two, which shall be left to feed your starving family."

These words threw Haspard in such a terrible fright that the colour went out of his face, and his teeth chattered in his head.

"You joke, sir," he stammered. "If I deliver the sheep up to you, Sir Beauclerc will assuredly hang me when he returns."

"Dog does not often eat dog, nor Norman kill Norman," Robin Hood said. "I will leave a letter exonerating you from all blame."

Suddenly an idea flashed into Haspard's dull brain. He must get Prince John and Sir Henwick Beauclerc away before Robin Hood sent his foresters to collect the sheep.

"I need no help," he said. "I have two good dogs which will round up the sheep, and trust me to bring them in. It will be the better plan, for the sight of strangers will only scare the sheep and scatter them in all directions."

"See to it, then," Robin Hood said, "and fail not. I warn you that if you attempt to play me a trick, you shall hang without any help from Sir Henwick Beauclerc."

The outlaw threw the man a few silver coins, and away he went without even stopping to call at an inn.

Up the rough paths, footsore, hot, and perspiring, he strode, and almost sank with fatigue as he reached the threshold of his hut.

"By the rood!" he cried, as he staggered in, "you must go, horses or no horses! Robin Hood's men will be here soon. Fly! There is not a moment to lose! Yonder lies a path leading to the main road, and within two miles you will come to an inn kept by a Norman, once henchman to Sir Oswald de Burgh. Declare your quality, and he will provide you with the means of reaching London. I can do nothing more than warn you."

Putting on slouched hats, the prince and sheriff made for the door, without waiting to hear more.

"Stay," said Haspard. "I have risked my life for you, and must be paid. Sir Henwick Beauclerc, it will not hurt you to empty your purse into my hand."

"Villain!" Sir Henwick cried, in a fury; "I will pay you in other coin than gold some day."

"Have a care how you threaten me," Haspard said. "I can procure a greater reward than the contents of your purse,

if I return to Nottingham and tell how Prince John and Sir Henwick Beauclerc are escaping in the disguise of two bondsmen."

"Perdition seize you!" Sir Henwick cried, hurling his purse at Haspard's feet. "For every coin that passes through your thieving fingers you shall have torture, the nature of which you little dream of!"

"You will have to catch me first," Haspard sneered. "I know of a little farm in a distant part of the country my heart has often yearned for."

Prince John had not said a word up to this time; but now from his throat there came a snarling sound, and catching Haspard by the throat he pressed him against the wall.

"Kill him, Beauclerc!" the prince hissed. "Strike hard, and strike home! He has warned us, and death shall be his reward!"

"Mercy!" gasped the shepherd.

"Seek for it elsewhere," Sir Henwick Beauclerc said. "Such a dog as you is not fit to live. Down to perdition, and say I sent you there!"

That instant he dealt a terrible blow.

Haspard uttered only one dreadful cry and collapsed at the feet of Prince John.

"Pick up your purse, Beauclerc," the prince said coolly. "Money is of no use to this carrion now."

In a few moments they were sneaking down the path, and passing unnoticed, escaped, for within two hours they were on horseback and galloping for their lives towards London.

That same night, when all was still, Robin Hood and his merry men turned their backs on Nottingham for Sherwood Forest.

There they were greeted by those who loved them so well, and we need not tell what a happy reunion it was.

"Friar," said Little John, "why did not Robin Hood order the castle to be burnt?"

"Because," Friar Tuck replied, "he hopes to see a good Saxon nobleman live there before he dies."

"But these beggarly Normans will come again."

"Of course they will," Friar Tuck replied. "Then there will be more fighting, and that is what Robin Hood desires. Ay, even a man of peace such as I am would find time hang idly on my hands but for a little gentle excitement."

"Allan-a-Dale," Winifreda said, holding him in her arms, "what of my father?"

Allan-a-Dale looked sadly into her eyes, and she knew the truth.

"I cannot complain," she said. "He might have lived happily, but—"

"Winifreda," Allan-a-Dale said, "tears are idle. Let us hope that he now sees the error of his ways, and is at peace."

"Requiescat in pace," said Friar Tuck solemnly.

Just then a cloud darkened the sky. It was an omen of more trouble for the defenders of liberty.

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